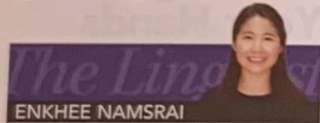




What's in a script?

In the Year of Mongol Script, we consider how the survival of Mongolian cultural identity is tied to its writing system



The Mongolian language has always been unique, both in its spoken form and in its traditional script. These have existed in parallel for a millennium or more, but during the 70 years of Soviet domination, the connection between spoken Mongolian and its ancient written form was broken in Mongolia when it was replaced by Cyrillic. In contrast, the traditional script was retained in the Chinese Autonomous Region of Inner Mongolia. Now it is being revived in democratic Mongolia but faces suppression in China.

The Mongolian scholar Shagdarsuren Tsevel once said that "a people's language, script, and intellectual life are an integrated unit. If one part gets distorted, the others get distorted too."¹ Today, the survival of ancient scripts and languages is a matter of

global concern. What will be the fate of this ancient script and its connection to spoken Mongolian in the future?

A brief history

At the start of the 13th century, advised by the Uyghur scribe Tata Tonga, Chinggis Khaan adopted the Uyghur script (which was derived from Sogdian) as the official writing system for the entire Mongolian state. As a result, it is sometimes called Uyghur script, but I will refer to it as Mongol bichig. The earliest-known monument inscribed in Mongol bichig is the stone Stele of Chinggis Khaan, dated around 1224. Its five lines of text commemorate the archery skills of Chinggis's nephew.

Written vertically, the new script transcribed Mongolian as it was at the time and retains its pronunciation, spelling and grammar. As a result, there is a significant difference between modern standard spoken Mongolian and how the language is written in Mongol bichig. For

instance, Mongolia's capital 'Ulaanbaatar' is written 'Ulaghan baghatour', which was the archaic pronunciation and spelling.

During the 17th to 19th centuries, Mongol bichig was widely used to translate Buddhist texts, as well as for official inscriptions, poetry, documents, literature, written versions of oral traditions and family records. Knowledge of the script was restricted largely to political and religious elites, while ordinary people were mostly illiterate.

Under Soviet pressure to spread communist ideology and education, Mongolia adopted the Cyrillic script in the 1940s. It was significantly easier to learn and literacy greatly improved. One cannot transliterate modern Mongolian into Mongol bichig letter by letter; you have to learn the archaic spellings and grammar. However, continuity between the modern and older forms of the Mongolian language is a fundamental feature of the history and

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

The statue of Chinggis Khaan in front of the main government building in Ulaanbaatar. The inscription reads 'Heavenly Ruler Chinggis Khaan Founder of the Great Mongolian State' (main image); a notice at Chojin Lama Temple Museum with Mongol bichig, cyrillic and English text side by side (above); and 'Mongol bichig' written in the script (below). It isn't possible to include words in Mongol bichig in the main article because it is written vertically

evolution of Mongol culture. Not being able to read Mongol bichig cuts Mongolians off from their literary and historical roots.

Mongolia's sense of national identity has strengthened following the retreat of Soviet influence and Mongolia's entry into the wider community of nations. Since communism ended in the 1990s, there have been efforts to revive the use of Mongol bichig as a core feature of that unique identity.

Revival efforts

When communist China was founded, the government decided to retain Mongol bichig, with Chinese, as the two official languages of Inner Mongolia. In this way, Inner Mongolia became the surviving heartland of Mongol bichig, maintaining widespread literacy in the script across generations.

A new Chinese nationalist policy restricting the use of Mongolian and banning Mongol script in schools now threatens the local

survival of both the written and the spoken language. Chinese is now the only language of instruction in all subjects; increasingly, textbooks in Mongol bichig are being taken out of circulation, and even destroyed. "This is the final blow to our culture," according to Enghebatu Togochoo,² an overseas spokesman on Mongolian civil rights in China.

Since 2015, the Mongolian government has actively promoted the revival of Mongol bichig, naming 2024 the Year of Mongol bichig. From 2025, it will be adopted as an official script alongside Cyrillic. Calligraphy in Mongol bichig has already been included in Unesco's list of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding. Only when a new generation has grown up using it confidently will its survival be assured. For the sake of Mongolian culture as a whole, the government's efforts must succeed.

Notes

- Quoted in Bulgamaa, B (2010) Түүрэг тусгаар Монгол Улсын төрд үндэсний бичиг нь үгүйлэгдэж байна. National Association of the Teachers of the Mongolian Language and Script official website; <https://cutt.ly/bichig>
- Quoted in Sonam, O and Bougdaeva, S (2020) 'Why the World Should Care About Language in Inner Mongolia'. In *The Diplomat*, 16/10/20

TL Enkhee Namsrai MCIL CL is a Mongolian language and culture consultant providing training to clients including the UK government.

Crossword solution

Puzzle page 32

A	N	V	K	I	K	A	V	I	R	E	T	E
R	A	G	N	L	E	S						
V	M	I	G	M	P	O	P	E				
N	H	L	D	M	O	L						
O	H	S	A	B	E	V	T	C				
V	H	S	I	E	R	E	R	L	I	S		
S	W	O	C	O								
N	O	K	I	V	D	N	O	H	I	N		
I	T	I	V	I	C	V						
N	E	W	R	K	C	P	L	O	P			
V	O	O	I	O	N	V						
R	O	T	V	T	I	W	I	O	P	I		